

Alice #20

It was his barrage of abuse about some fruit that I had bought in a Saturday shopping trip that prompted me to leave. That sounds ridiculous and trivial, but for me it was a signifier that if this man could take issue with something as trivial as fruit, nothing could ever please him.

We met in our first year of university. He pursued me relentlessly. I dropped my then boyfriend, so caught up was I in this new young man's entreaties and protestations of love and we quickly moved in together. I did wonder at the time how someone could be so besotted in me so readily.

Not once over the many years we were together did he hit me. However he wrought such mental, emotional and financial abuse on me that even though nearly double the years have passed since I ended it, I still shudder at the thought of him. I still carry the shame for staying with him so long, and still regret I let him shut me out of the lives of my family for so long.

We graduated from university and became well paid professionals. Almost daily I would be subjected to vicious taunts, about the way I walked, the way I wore my hair, the way I spoke, and was criticised about my choice in reading material...and in general, my inferior intellect and upbringing. Even a trip to the movies would involve him quizzing me afterwards about the film and ridiculing anything I said about it. He went from praising me to the skies in the first few months to crushing me underfoot. He made me write down lists of the many things wrong with me. Somehow I allowed this to happen, allowed myself to think I was worthless and needed him. I was afraid to stand on my own.

It seems obscene to compare my situation to the desperation a mother of small children must feel living with a physically abusive man. I had none of that and yet mentally I was imprisoned. Financially he made it difficult to leave, even though we were not struggling. At his insistence, we set up a joint bank account and therefore he kept track of the little I spent. He would criticise my dress sense and appearance and yet not allow me to spend any money on clothes. He could not abide my relatives and therefore we saw very little of them. I was socially isolated for many years. Gradually I made friends through work and gradually I grew in confidence. I began to fantasise about a life without constant control and oversight.

We had a huge fight several days after the fruit incident. I had arrived home from work after a mid week drink with colleagues, something I never did, a bit tipsy and giggly. I think he sensed my newfound confidence and it threatened him. He screamed at me like a madman. As usual, I retreated into a corner. I never fought back. He called me a 'yobbo'. I agreed with him and said 'yes, I'm a yobbo and I'm happy about that'. We slept in separate rooms. I did not sleep a wink. I came up with a comprehensive plan to leave. I told him the next day we were having lunch together to discuss it. I explained to him rationally at lunch I was leaving him and I had made up my mind. He said very little. He seemed to be a hurt little boy. I soon found an apartment to rent and a band of friends helped me to take the few possessions from the house he agreed I could take. I opened up my own bank account and my salary started going into that. I got a new hair cut. I began to shape my own destiny, although it would take several years to really find my feet. It was not easy, particularly not blaming myself. I re-established contact with my family. I re-established my relationship with myself.

Domestic violence can be wrought emotionally and it can happen to anyone at any socio-economic level. Listen to your inner voice, reach out to others and get out when you know you should.
